



SLDS GUIDE

Promoting Your SLDS Through Effective Communication: A Primer



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Your state or territory has been building an information tool—the statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS)—that can help people know more and make better education and economic decisions in the classroom, boardroom, and beyond. This system protects and makes use of data that can provide real insights into the effects of a range of inputs as early as birth and early childhood education, and on through outcomes in college and the workforce. However, for this system to reach its potential and provide its intended benefits, your stakeholders will need to know about its value, use, and support, and why they can rely upon that system for information and understanding. With challenges such as funding, changes in leadership and priorities, staff turnover, state politics, and lack of resources for communication efforts, communicating that message is no small task. An effective, consistent, and persistent communication effort is, therefore, critical to the system’s success.

A Primer for Better Communication

This SLDS Grant Program guide will help you develop messages about and communicate the benefits of an SLDS for your stakeholders. It offers basic tips on developing simple, low-cost, effective communications regarding your SLDS. It also helps prompt important conversations and work among state education agency staff to help you deliver your message to the right audiences.

This product does not assume you have a full-fledged communications firm at your disposal, and it is not intended to replicate such a firm’s effort. This brief can support organizations that may not include communications experts but that want some easy-to-implement tips and lessons learned from the field. This brief is the first in a series of materials designed to help support communications activities in your state or territory.

This product is organized into four sections, which represent a suggested process for preparing for, developing, and disseminating communications:

1. **Know Your Product:** Take an objective look at how you describe your product.
2. **Identify Your Audience and Goals:** Consider the audience(s) you want to reach and the ways in which you want to change their thinking or behavior.
3. **Craft Your Message:** Develop your message considering the audience. This section includes nine tips and considerations and is the main focus of this brief.
4. **Deliver Your Message:** Package your message and deliver it to your audience.

1. Know Your Product



First, take a fresh, objective look at how you describe your product (that is, your SLDS). Your state or territory has invested time, energy, and money in designing, developing, implementing, and making it possible to use an SLDS. However, states differ in how they define SLDS. For some, it is the student data collection system. For others, it is the warehouse of longitudinal data. Still others see it as the broader data collection, storage, and reporting system and tools.

- What is this product you want to communicate about?
- What features and functionality make it valuable to potential users and beneficial to the state’s education system, economy, and general wellbeing?
- Why does your state or territory need the system, and what would it lose if the system ceased to exist?

These fundamental questions are core to any SLDS communication effort.

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Anthony Garofano
SLDS Grant Program, State Support Team

Kathy Gosa
SLDS Grant Program, State Support Team

Baron Rodriguez
SLDS Grant Program, State Support Team

For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program or for support with system development, please visit
<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS>.



Take time to describe your system realistically and objectively. What insights or efficiencies can it provide that would not be available without it? What system features make these benefits possible? What technical features allow it to function, and what security features ensure that it protects the sensitive information it contains?

2. Identify Your Audience and Goals



Consider the audience(s) you want to reach and the ways in which you want to change their thinking or behavior. Another fundamental element of effective communication is a thorough understanding of the intended audience(s). These are the people for whom you have designed the system or who will use or benefit from the system.

Audiences can be local administrators and educators, parents and students, researchers, legislators, program directors and staff, developers of educational materials, or businesses. A broad range of stakeholders can be affected by or benefit from the system in some way. Your job is to answer the question: *Who are the stakeholders?*

Ideally, you answered this question when you started designing your SLDS, keeping those end users and stakeholders' needs in mind from the beginning and developing a system that could deliver and meet those needs. After all, if your system does not provide clear benefits to its stakeholders, it will be even more difficult to communicate effectively with them. If you did not define your audience early on, it is not too late. Even if you did, it is wise to revisit your audiences to be sure your initial thinking is still relevant. Ask yourself the following:

- What do they want or need that the SLDS can offer?
- What are the problems they face that the SLDS can help solve?

To answer these questions, consider the audience perspective. Consider the questions, concerns, and thoughts your audience might have as they consider using the SLDS. What are their problems or difficulties, and how can the SLDS help them? If you have the opportunity, it is also a good idea to talk with stakeholders to gather their thoughts.

Once you have identified your stakeholders and the ways in which they can benefit from the SLDS, think about your goals for communicating to them about the SLDS.

- How do you want to affect your audience?
- How do you want to change their thinking and/or behavior?

For some, the goal might be to promote greater, more effective use of the system. For others, you might aim to increase awareness and understanding of the system and its value, perhaps to gain more support and funding for the system. Do you want to spark conversation, raise awareness, or gain support?

Different audiences might need different messages. Legislators and policymakers, for example, might be more interested in knowing about the SLDS's return on investment and its cost effectiveness, and their appreciation of the system could influence continued investment and system sustainability. When communicating with administrators responsible for supplying data to the SLDS, the goal might be to convince them of the value of accurate, timely data. Whoever you are communicating with, remember that the data are *their* data. Think about why the SLDS is important to them and to everyone in the state or territory.

3. Craft Your Message



Develop your message with your audience goals in mind. Set out to craft a simple, yet effective message about what your system is. Use words that can generate or boost interest in your SLDS or evoke another desired response. Here are some tips on crafting an effective message:

Appeal to emotion

A message should evoke some type of emotional response from its audience. If your audience does not care more about the SLDS and the benefits of the system after they have received your message, reassess

your messaging. In marketing terms, messages can evoke either joy or fear in their audience. Consider what could make members of your audience either happy about the SLDS or concerned that it will not be enhanced and preserved.

- What information or insight can they gain from the SLDS that will make their lives easier?
- What information or functionality will help them be more effective at their jobs?
- Can the system automate or streamline their work and give them more time to focus on activities that support students and schools?

Your message does not necessarily need to mention the SLDS. In fact, it may be better to focus on the parts of the system that the audience will interact with or benefit from most. Just like a person shopping for a new car might care more about features like safety, performance, reliability, and comfort than what is under the hood, a potential SLDS user might be most interested in the system's interface and output. They might not care about the technical features that make the system run. Access to historical student data, insights about the effectiveness of curricula, or an analysis of strengths and areas for improvement for individual students might be what gets them interested.

Conversely, you might try to gain support for the system by making it plain to your audience what the state would lose if the system ceased to exist. This angle is particularly and increasingly relevant as states' federal SLDS grants end and they look to sustain their work.

- What research could no longer be conducted?
- What information would no longer be available without this asset?
- What efficiencies would no longer be possible?

Think about how *you* feel about the system. Can you channel your feelings and passion to persuade others? A person who can answer yes to this question can be an ideal messenger.

Feelings Matter

Aim to evoke emotion (joy, fear, or both) in your audience.

Joy: Get them interested in and excited about the great things the SLDS makes possible.

"With this system, we can now do that!?"

Fear, anxiety, or concern: If the SLDS is at risk, make them understand the consequences of losing a great asset.

"If this system isn't sustained, we'll no longer be able to do that!?"

Anticipate

Even the most effective message can fail if negative misconceptions about the SLDS get in the way. Anticipate questions, concerns, and misunderstandings. Privacy and accountability are common concerns, often leading to ideas like "Data systems track students," "Students' personal information is at risk," or "Data will be used to punish teachers." These are valid concerns that often shade people's perspectives of an SLDS and keep them from understanding what the system can and cannot do. Get ahead of these negative messages by thinking through the issues in advance and crafting thoughtful, honest, and direct responses. Frequently asked questions, testimonials, case studies, or examples of effective uses of data can all help combat naysaying and suspicion that can imperil the system.

Focus on benefits rather than features

A *feature* is a characteristic of a product. A *benefit* is an advantage that a feature offers for a person's life. When talking to a general audience—or to a specific one that is more interested, whether they know it or not, in the system's potential for positive effects—it is more effective to emphasize the system's benefits than its features. What can people gain from using the SLDS, both now and in the not-too-distant future?

Articulate Real-World Benefits

Whenever possible, try to go deeper than high-level assertions of benefits. Starting a communications product with statements such as those below is good, but try to support those statements with real-world, tangible, relatable examples like those that follow the statements.

Statement: “The SLDS helps educators and policymakers make informed decisions.”

Support: “Math teachers at Central High School used SLDS data to revise their math program, and that has cut in half the number of graduates who must take developmental math when entering college.”

Statement: “SLDS data help improve our understanding of how our kids progress through the education system.”

Support: “Our state now better understands the effects that our early childhood programs have on students after the fourth grade.”

Statement: “The SLDS improves student learning and decisionmaking, and it informs better allocation of scarce resources.”

Support: “Administrators have used SLDS data to determine which e-learning tools have provided the greatest return on investment.”

Although a technical audience might be excited about the SLDS’s features and specifications, abstract system attributes alone will not mean much to most stakeholders. Try to connect and persuade the audience with benefits, then support your message by explaining the features that make the benefits possible. For example, rather than telling people that the SLDS leverages a state-of-the-art widget, tell them about how practitioners are actually using the SLDS. Better yet, tell them how the SLDS is benefiting students, how it can help agencies save money and use resources more effectively, or what researchers have been able to do with the data so far. Try to dig deeper than high-level statements of benefits and show specific, real-world examples whenever possible.

Show off

Great visuals and a clean, professional-looking communications product can engage your audience and help them connect with your message. A well-designed and well-laid-out document helps readers digest information, helps them enjoy reading it, and can instill confidence in the subject and its authors.¹

Visual elements can help to illustrate complex concepts and bring the SLDS to life. If you have an inviting-looking data dashboard, web application, or report, put it front and center in communications products. Add representative screenshots to put a “face” on the system—making sure that the images do not reveal any personally identifiable information. Strive for a realistic representation of the SLDS as much as possible. For example, avoid fake, staged-looking stock photos and instead include images from your state or territory.² Images are more effective when they look natural.

Strive for simplicity and efficiency

People often are short on time and attention. Avoid being ignored or forgotten by crafting a message that is clear, concise, and engaging. When writing, keep messages simple. When editing, be ruthless. Eliminate excess language and try to say what you mean in as few words as possible. Write concisely, but avoid writing so densely that your text is hard to follow. To test your product’s clarity, ask a colleague or friend—ideally one unfamiliar with the SLDS—to read your work to make sure your message is understandable and

Exercise

Pretend you are explaining the SLDS to a fellow partygoer who could benefit from the system but is about to leave. What would you tell them?

¹ Some audiences, particularly internal ones, might view a polished or expensive-looking document as a waste of resources. Know your audiences’ expectations and design products for them that are practical without being distracting.

² Remember to get permission from people featured in a photo before using it.

does not require rereading. Try to connect with your audience right away rather than making them trudge through dense or extraneous text. Focus on statements that resonate, and avoid overwhelming your audience with lots of details, background information, history, possibilities, and technical specifications.

Communicate authenticity

You know that your SLDS has great value and potential. What is great about it? Tell an authentic, true, believable story about the system's capabilities and how it has been or could be used. Try not to exaggerate or overpromise. For example, if you do not yet have a usable teacher dashboard or if key features are not yet available, be careful to set reasonable expectations. It will be much harder to get people to care about, use, and support the system if it falls short of their expectations.

Find your voice

When communicating about the SLDS you want to sound professional, but to what extent should your words be warm, conversational, lively, relaxed, lofty, or creative? You probably will want to be somewhat formal in your writing, but avoid being dull—regardless of your audience. Your text should not sound like “corporate ipsum.”³ Consider the extent to which you can tailor your communication style and story to reflect the characteristics of your state, not just on the technical details of the SLDS. Consider your state's people, history, landscape, inside jokes, and quirks. Think about how your system was designed to meet your state's specific needs or to support its unique environment.

Tip: When writing, think about your target audience and pretend you are speaking to a person among this group. This will help you focus on your audience's needs and write more naturally.

Be consistent

With a variety of partners telling the SLDS story with different perspectives, states sometimes have difficulty keeping their messages consistent and ensuring that people are all “singing from the same sheet of music.” A consistent message across products and spoken words will help to strengthen your messaging and avoid confusion. Ensure that all your products', promoters', and partners' messages are consistent. Are your communications products and pitches up to date? Sometimes system plans change. Are you still developing a certain feature or privacy control, or did the plan or timeline shift? Keeping track of, organizing in a central place, and dating or indicating versions of your communications products can help keep them accessible, current, and accurate.

Encourage action

Now that you have gained your audience's interest, entice them to take a simple next step with a call to action. Asking them to click a link to learn more is great, but think about what else you can offer them. What exciting thing can they do next?

Inspire Action Creatively

A clever call to action will hook a reader. Instead of a phrase like “*learn more*,” consider something like “*Turn your questions into answers. Visit ...*” Think outside the box and have fun!

You might encourage them to use the data dashboard to gain some new insight, visit a great website, watch a video, view or attend a presentation or training, or read a report with key findings. Be creative and go for maximum impact. Whatever your call to action is, do not let it be an afterthought. Think of it as a key opportunity for you and your audience.

³ <http://www.cipsum.com/>

4. Deliver Your Message



Finally, package your message and deliver it to your audience. Once you have developed your core message, decide what type of communications product(s) you will use to deliver it.

When deciding how to deliver your message, consider the following:

- What kind of communication is most likely to grab the audience's attention, and what types of communication can they access?
- What medium will best accommodate your content?
- Do you have access to a graphic and/or publication designer who can help to package your message in a visually interesting and refined format?

Outreach efforts can take many forms. For example, you can create one or more of the following to support your message:

- A brief overview document (e.g., a one- or two-page flyer)
- An SLDS web page/website
- A presentation slide deck
- An infographic
- A video
- Standard email text
- Newsletters (for general or specific audiences such as educators and administrators, legislators and their staffs, etc.)
- Social media posts (e.g., a text post, photo, highlighted data or findings, data use tip of the day, infographic, or illustration)
- An FAQ or fact sheet
- An elevator speech

Once you have developed a high-quality outreach product, it is time to deliver your message to your target audience. Consider the best method(s) for reaching them.

- Will you speak your message, hand people a product, post it online, or email it?
- Will your slide deck be delivered through a presentation or training session?
- What kind of communication might your target audience be most likely to pay attention to or consume?

A dissemination plan can help you organize possible strategies for delivering your message. It includes key information such as the communications product's purpose and format; the person or people responsible for its development and dissemination; methods for measuring the product's effectiveness; and how, when, and by whom the product will be reviewed so that it remains relevant and up to date.

Messaging Tips

- ✓ Focus on your audience and the goals of your communications effort, specifically the effect or response you aim to have on your audience.
- ✓ Fascinate! Do not settle for a dull language, especially in the introductory paragraph. Try to grab the audience's attention right away. Connect with them with a bold statement about what the SLDS makes possible or an engaging example that the audience will relate to. Do not start with boilerplate background details like legislation, funding, or technical specifications that, while important, might not rivet your reader.
- ✓ Use plain and direct language that will resonate with your audience and speak to their needs and interests. Avoid dense, jargon-heavy language for general audiences.
- ✓ Be realistic and authentic, highlighting the current and future benefits made possible with the SLDS without overpromising or creating expectations that will not be met.
- ✓ Promote benefits of the system rather than focusing too much on the features that make those benefits possible.
- ✓ Inspire action. Now that you have your audience's attention, give them a compelling call to action—a next step to engage with SLDS or to get more information.

Additional Resources

Branding (and Rebranding) Your SLDS to Increase Data Use: SLDS Webinar

<https://slds.grads360.org/services/PDCService.svc/GetPDCDocumentFile?fileId=24139>

Communicating Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) Design: Developing Presentation and Conceptual Diagrams

<https://slds.grads360.org/services/PDCService.svc/GetPDCDocumentFile?fileId=14168>

Elevator Speeches: SLDS Best Practices Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5907>

Engaging Stakeholders to Expand Data Use in Support of P-20W+ Strategies: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/14673>

SLDS Sustainability Planning Guide

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/2640>

Stakeholder Engagement Plan for Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Guide & Template

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/3083>

Sustaining the Ongoing Work of the Data System: SLDS Issue Brief

<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/8124>